

# 'Global Schoolhouse' Links Youths Via Video

By John Burgess

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Ozone, acid rain, last month's oil spill into a Potomac River tributary. Fifth-graders at an Arlington school had a face-to-face discussion on those weighty subjects yesterday with students from Tennessee, California and England. And the students didn't have to leave their classrooms.

They met electronically in an international video conference, their faces appearing on Macintosh computer screens, their voices emanating from telephone speakers. The Global Schoolhouse, the system's creators call it.

The hourlong session was a carefully staged and scripted demonstration, too expensive for the average school to afford and too complex to operate. And the video was primitive—black and white and jerky.

But the National Science Foundation, which sponsored the demonstration, contends that links like this will improve, drop in price and become common at schools if the nation presses forward with plans to build high-capacity data circuits known as "information highways."

"This is the kind of technology we'll see in every home and office in just a few years," said Michael Nelson, an aide to Vice President Albert Gore Jr. Gore has promoted the concept since his days in the Senate.

Yesterday, the children in London aired fuzzy video clips of themselves gathering water for acidity tests. Children in Tennessee briefed the others on field trips to rivers in the Tennessee Valley.

The Arlington children, students at Long Branch Elementary School,

told the others of the accident that dumped 400,000 gallons of diesel fuel into Sugarland Run.

Arlington children who took part in the video conference gave it top marks as an educational tool. "People appear out of the blue and you get to know them," said Isabel Mueller, 10. Richie Robinson, 11, noted that the link allowed Long Branch to learn easily of work done by children at three other schools.

With White House and federal agency officials looking on approvingly, the children reveled in their time in the spotlight. They offered mixed opinions as to what would happen if the links became standard equipment.

One girl suggested that students would lose their excitement. Alexi Charles, 10, disagreed. "Different places do different things," she said. "You could compare and contrast."

Improved education is a prime benefit being promised by proponents of the information highway concept. But yesterday's demonstration, carried on a global network known as Internet, underlined some of the difficulties.

Computer companies and outside groups had to lend thousands of dollars of equipment. Outside technicians had to set up the project. And even then, there were glitches.

A screen went blank temporarily midway through the demonstration, leading project coordinator Carl Malamud to quip, "We're not getting video from London—we're proving that this is a real network."

Even if problems of money and technology are overcome, integrating the services into a school curriculum could prove difficult.

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